Disciplined and Independent Painting

Some Instructive Contrasts In Current American Art

By Royal Cortissoz

There is to be one more exhibition of war art, and this time it is to be hoped that we may be spared the quantities of mediocre stuff which have hitherto been characteristic of so many affairs of the kind. The Society of Illustrators is to make the expected demonstration at the National Arts Club, beginning on April 1. In addition to designs made for books and magazines there will be posters, cartoons and examples of commercial art. It will be particularly interesting to see the paintings produced by the artists who went to the front at the request of the government. They have had time now to mature the impressions received in France and to put forth work more persuasive than that done under the stress of military conditions. Of course, theoretically, the first-hand sketches of the moment ought to be the best; but since they didn't, as a matter of fact, prove very exhilarating—save in the case of Mr. Claggett Wilson's dramatic drawings—we are impelled to rest our hopes upon paintings worked over at leisure.

Mr. Metcalf's New Landscapes

There is an exhibition at the Milch gallery of recent landscapes by Mr. Willard L. Metcalf which sets one to thinking upon his whole career. When he returned from Paris in the eighties he figured as a member of that group of Americans who had felt the influence of impressionism, but the earlier pictures from his brush which we recall were not notably distinguished for their solution of open air problems. His interest in the subject was sincere, but did not immediately produce important results. One of his most ambitious paintings in that period, as it lingers in the memory, was an interior with a figure posed in the north light, typical of works prepared for the Salon. It was altogether a Salon piece. It suggested no interest in nature at all. As a matter of fact there is probably no American landscape painter who has served a severer apprenticeship to nature. In his youth in Boston he worked in the studio of George L. Brown, the wood engraver, who was born more than a hundred years ago, turned painter, studied and copied in the Louvre, and came back to America in 1860 with a lot of pictures he had made in Italy, large Turneresque compositions more or less classical in feeling. Brown was a man of tradition, and because he was not a man of genius his pictures have been outmoded, but like all right-minded followers of tradition he had a profound respect for truth, for the integrity of art, and he instilled in his young disciple some invaluable principles. He taught Metcalf how to draw and he taught him especially how to define through good draftsmanship every detail in the character of a tree. It is a point the lasting virtue of which it is impossible to exaggerate.

An immense amount of modern landscape painting is invalidated through the thin, insubstantial manner in which it summarily hurries over ground, tree and cloud forms. It is based on a superficial and purely visual conception. The constructive grasp which marks Rousseau, for example, is very rare. Brown aimed at it, and he inspired Metcalf to cultivate the same ideal. It has been at the bottom of the work through which the younger painter gradually achieved his repute in the exhibitions of the Society of American Artists, then in those of the Ten American Painters and in the two or three shows he has made by himself. His repute, in short, is due to his use of thoroughly acquired knowledge. Year after year he has interested the observer through sound workmanship. As the years have gone on he has added other qualities to his art. From time to time pictures of his have appeared in which craftsmanship has been strengthened by poetic emotion, and occasionally the fusion of material and more subtle elements has been of a high order. We remember particularly a perfect winter scene, "The White Mantle," now in a private collection, and the "May Night," a moonlight picture which hangs in the Corcoran Gallery at Washington. For a long while, however, it had seemed as though these finer pictures of Metcalf's were exceptional and lucky hits. He went on producing other pictures in a purely pedestrian mood. He does this in some instances at the present time. But he has reached the zenith of his powers and is now no longer subject to chance. That, at all events, is the impression we gather from the landscapes at the Milch gallery. They represent, on the whole, the best work of his life. Never hitherto has he been so evenly sure of himself, never hitherto has he put forth so many beautiful pictures with such unmistakable ease, with such well sustained elevation of feeling. No previous group of his paintings has given us such unalloyed pleasure.

The winter subjects are enchanting records of times of deep snow among the New Hampshire hills. "The Enveloping Mantle," for example, brings back all of the truth of the winter scene cited above and is invested with an even richer magic. The constructive quality which we have indicated is there, felt even in the large area which is covered with snow; and in the trees through which the flakes are falling, in the half obscured house nestling in the background, Mr. Metcalf has contrived to express all of that beautiful atmospheric sentiment of the American country side which not all the prose in our national life can keep us from calling romantic. The charm of this picture, too, rests in great measure upon its originality, upon the touch which is the artist's own. Over and over again he has interpreted the beauty of the New England winter, witness the "Snow-Bound," the "Midwinter" and the "Hauling Wood." The spirit varies with the motive. The "Snow-Bound" is not so exquisite as is "The Enveloping Mantle." But in them all there is beauty, making veracious things haunting. In the study of winter he would appear to have achieved his special metier, yet he knows how to express with much of the same delicacy the blithe note of spring, as in the "Young Birches in May" or the singing colors of waning summer, as in the brilliant "Early Autumn," a picture with the sparkle of champagne. We might go on signalizing this or that canvas in the collection of fifteen, but the essential point is to emphasize the painter's progress at large. This is one of the delightfulest things we have had to record in a long time.

The Society of Independents

It ought to be an edifying experience for those who frequent the art galleries to ponder upon what discipline has meant to an artist like Metcalf and then to walk through the exhibition of nearly nine hundred works which is being made at the Waldorf by the Society of Independent Arists. There are some pictures in this show, to be sure, by contributor who have been through the schools and have learned their trade. They make, at long intervals, mildly interesting episodes. We say "mildly" because the trained hands, as it happens, have not taken pains to send anything of great consequence. Besides, the occasion is obviously the occasion for the "Independent," which is to say the Cubist, or similar freakish painter and the amateur who may obtain wall space by joining the society and fill it untroubled by the intervention of a jury. These are the individuals, men and women, who give the exhibition its character. And they leave it crude, dull, nothing more nor less than an organized bore. Promoters of a show like this one assume the adverse commentator, perhaps, to be out of sympathy with progressive ideas, with true independence. This, of course, is nonsense. For our own part, if there is one thing for which we are always searching and over which we are eager to rejoice it is the new, progressive type in art, the type having something fresh to say and an independent way of saying it. Surely there is nothing more inspiring in criticism than an encounter with youthful vitality bursting through the crust of convention. On the other hand, criticism knows nothing more depressing than an encounter with simply bad pictures, with the feeble impertinences of untrained dabsters. It is sometimes asserted that a huge miscellaneous picture-fair may reward the searcher after lurking talent. But talent never lurks. There is no such thing, said Swinburne, as an inarticulate poet. There is no such thing, we may add, as an obscurable talent in art. When a painter has a gift you may try to lose him in a wilderness of mediocrities, but his gift will shine like a beacon in the dark. We believe that now and then an "Independent" emerges confident in the glamour of being a truant from the hardships of a carter or a plumber. This may make piquant reading in the casual "human interest" paragraph. But all it has to do with art is to remind us of the possibly painful, but nevertheless inexorable, principle that it is better, manlier to drive a dray than to add to the world's rubbish heap of bad pictures.

The Show of the Allied Artists

There is another organization which stands up to be counted for progress just now. The Allied Artists of America make at the Kleinberger gallery their seventh annual exhibition. They have for their object "the advancement of American art by opening new avenues of opportunity for the exhibition of meritorious works of art, without antagonism." The last phrase may hint, we suppose, at almost anything. We confess that we do not know what it means. But, at any rate, the Allied Artists can claim that among their renounced antagonisms they have dispensed with antagonism to honest workmanship. There is nothing freakish in their collection of a hundred pictures and thirteen sculptures. They subscribe like gentlemen to all the artistic decencies. For that we are grateful, and we are grateful besides for a certain number of interesting pictures.

It is inspiriting to meet the light, even gay, impressions of Mr. Edward H. Potthast, Mr. W. B. Closson, Mr. Lester D. Boronda and Mr. Ernest Peixotto. These are sprightly artists, having an amused outlook upon life. Mr. Peixotto's "Commedia del Arte" has an eighteenth century zest in it which we hope he will pursue. There is some capital painting in the two pictures by Mr. Maurice Fromkes. He lays on his strata of pigment in a very individualized and decorative way. There is a handsome portrait, "Autumn," by Miss Helen M. Turner. Mr. Ernest Albert sends in "The Brook" an admirable winter scene, and there are several good landscapes by Messrs. Chauncey F. Ryder, George M. Bruestle, Edmund Greacen, Cullen Yates, Ernest D. Roth, F. W. Hutchison, Robert H. Nisbet and Eliot Clark. The water front studies of Richard M. Kimbel and Hobart Nichols should also be favorably mentioned, and the sylvan cattle subject by Glenn Newell. There are enough good pictures in the exhibition, in a word, to reward a visit. This is very different, however, from saying that the Allied Arastis justify themselves this year as a separate body. The good pictures are sadly outnumbered by those that are mediocre. The little group of sculpture, for all its tolerable merit, contains nothing distinguished. It is the weakness of the organization as an organization. It adds to the exhibitions of the season without doing any more than to extend the routine. At the same time, let it be counted to the Allied Artists for righteousness that they provide a modest antidote to the wearisome vagaries of the Independents.

Random Impressions In Current Exhibitions

The Memorial Crafts Institute announces an exhibition of cemetery and church memorial designs at the Pennsylvania Hotel. The special feature is supplied by the drawings submitted in a prize competition for a war memorial for a small community. The jury of award is composed of W. Frank Purdy, H. Van Buren Magonigle and Robert Aitken.

A new exhibition was opened yesterday at the Macbeth gallery. It is composed of paintings by Hayley Lever and will last until April 10.

At the Babcock gallery there are recent paintings by Magnus Norstad and Sidney M. Wiggins. Mr. Norstad is a newcomer whom it is pleasant to welcome. His winter pictures are painted with force and at the same time with refinement of feeling as regards atmosphere. He has a marked pictorial sense. "The Palisades" is a really striking composition. There are the makings of a style in Mr. Norstad. His colleague on this occasion, Mr. Wiggins, has a certain clever facility, but does not yet disclose any singular traits.

The first fruits of the great Degas sale in Paris appear at the Durand-Ruel gallery in a collection of four-score pastels and drawings. The latter cover divers periods in his career, starting with the early "Etude de Draperie" (No. 62), which in its delicate precision proclaims him the disciple of Ingres. There are other drawings significant of the same influence, but the prevailing strain in the collection is that associated with his broader, more familiar practice. In their subjects these souvenirs illustrate his well known preoccupations, the dancers, the jockeys and those nudes which he studied as they popped in and out of the bathtub which he kept so incongruously in his studio. The walls hardly provide a banquet of beauty. Degas was often indifferent to the charms of his models if he did not, indeed, develop a cult for ugliness. But in beautiful draftsmanship the exhibition abounds.

The art of one of the most accomplished of the friends of Degas may be studied in New York for the next fortnight. There is an exhibition at the Keppel gallery of the etchings of Mary Cassatt. Another interesting print show is accessible at the Hahlo gallery. It is made up of the etchings of Donald Shaw Maclaughlan, including a number of new plates. He is an engaging type. There are echoes in him of Lepere, but he has fashioned a personal style, and though in his handling of line he is not always sensitive as to what to omit he remains very skillful. His Italian plates are especially good.

The etched work of Auguste Lepere himself is to be seen at full length and in magnificent form at the Knoedler gallery. His plates appear here from the collection of M. Petit-Didier, of Paris, who clearly had unusual opportunities to obtain interesting states in brilliant impressions. We cannot imagine a more resplendent representation of the artist. And what an artist he was! A consummate master of line, a manipulator of light and shade who possessed also an instinct for color as the etcher understands it, he used his fine equipment to develop a sharply defined style, and, best of all, a fairly lovable touch in the pictorial interpretation of architecture and landscape. The winning picturesqueness of Lepere is a possession apart in the annals of the graphic arts. In landscape he could be as tender as Corot and in his studies of old Paris he has a quality akin to that which Victor Hugo brought to a climax when he wrote "Nôtre Dame." No lover of prints should miss this precious exhibition. Every lover of prints, by the way, will be glad to hear that it is to be followed by one of Lepere's wood engravings.

In the upper room at Knoedler's there are some new paintings and water colors by Mr. Albert Felix Schmitt. He has a crisp, efficient way with him in the delineation of form, best illustrated, perhaps, in the open air study of the nude, "A Summer Idyl," and he is always deft in the capture of a vivid silhouette. His color is commonplace, bright but quite without quality. He has a facile and rather hollow talent.

An important print collection is to be dispersed on the evening of March 26 at the American Art Galleries. It is the collection of etchings and engravings formed by Mr. Walter Thomas Wallace, of South Orange. Dürer and Rembrandt are the principal old masters. There is a notable group of Whistlers and Haden is strongly represented. Conspicuous among the moderns is a brilliant figure, rare enough in the auction room nowadays for the twenty-five examples of him in Mr. Wallace's collection to excite fevered competition. This is Felix Buhot, an etcher fascinating in his originality and virtuosity. To have so many of his works disposed of at once is nothing less than a boon. There are Meryons in the Wallace collection, Millets, a plate by Zorn and three etchings by D. Y. Cameron. Besides the prints there are a few drawings, including three by E. A. Abbey.

Mr. Wallace's etchings, which were placed on view last Thursday, make an exhibition by themselves, but they are in a sense a subordinate issue, for his library of upward of 3,000 volumes was brought forward at the same time, to be broken up in what will undoubtedly prove to be the chief book sale of the season. It is remembered, for example, that in 1877 a copy of the long-lost "Poetry for Children," by Charles and Mary Lamb, was discovered in South Australia, of all places in the world. It is this identical copy that now reappears in the Wallace library, and it is characteristic in its rarity of his treasures. Mr. Wallace collected manuscripts and gems of the first printing presses. There are notable examples of Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde in the long list. Following the chronology of the bibliophile he gathered some rich prizes when he reached the Elizabethan age, Shakespearean folios and quartos, and scores upon scores of all the great English authors down to and through the nineteenth century. The rarities embrace Goldsmith, Shelley, Dickens, Keats, Leigh Hunt, Tennyson and Thackeray. There is, too, a wonderful group of first editions of American authors, a group which the very judiciously compiled catalogue designates as the most important ever offered for sale. Emerson, Holmes, Thoreau, Lowell and Longfellow are unusually complete. The collection of Poe includes practically everything except the first edition of "Tamerlane" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Early in April there will be a sale at the American Art Galleries of more than three hundred prints by Rembrandt, Dürer, Whistler, Haden, Zorn, Cameron and others collected by Mrs. Ellen R. Jenkins, of Baltimore. From the illustrated catalogue we judge that this, too, will be an important event.

The Rosenbach Company, of Philadelphia, long honorably known in the world of art, has opened permanent galleries here in Madison Avenue, near Fortieth Street. They are inaugurated with a small but choice exhibition of Barbizon pictures, including a brilliant little Rousseau, a fine Corot and a notable example of Millet. The upper rooms have been decorated in systematic fashion according to the modes of historic periods. The firm's new venture is auspiciously launched.

The Kevorkian gallery is evidently to be the scene of a generous artistic propaganda. A little while ago it introduced the work of Mr. Burchfield, from Salem, Ohio. Now it shows us paintings, water colors and drawings by another young Westerner, this time Mr. Varnum Poor, who was born in Kansas and has been living mostly in California. It is a kindly policy which thus encourages struggling aspirants, but it may be doubted if it serves to do them all the good that is contemplated. It may even do them harm through setting conspicuously upon the metropolitan stage artists who are, after all, but immature performers. Mr Poor, it seems, has been applauded by one commentator for the "rhythmic volumes" in his work, and another has hailed him as the accepted leader of the younger generation of painters on the Coast who follow in the path of Cézanne." As a matter of fact, Mr. Poor is at that stage where it would be more fitting for him to act as a follower than as a leader, and though he has picked up some useful hints in the path of Cézanne and employs them promisingly in a creditable process of simplification, it would be well for him to eschew for a time the influence of the French painter. It is stated that he has studied in London and Paris for a year, but the names of his instructors are not given. A year is not very long in the making of an artist. In a rather overwrought prefatory note to the catalogue Mr. Poor announces that he has come to live and work in the East because he wants to know America. "What American art is," he says, "and what it can become deeply concern me." In all friendliness we would urge Mr. Poor to go on learning what American art is—it will do him good if he will look at the right painters—and for some years at least not to concern himself at all as to "what it can become." It would profit him to let theorizing alone, to submit himself to the doubtless dull drudgery of an academic training, and thereby to make the best of the very modest ability which he at present discloses.

The Anderson Galleries will open tomorrow an exhibition of works of art from the collections of E. Colonna and others, with duplicates from the Thomas E. H. Curtis collection of antique glass. The sale, which will take place on three afternoons, beginning next Thursday, will disperse a great variety of objects from Persia, China, and Japan.

The Metropolitan Museum announces a series of five illustrated lectures by William B. Dinsmoor on the culmination of Greek architecture in the age of Pericles. The lectures will be given on March 25, April 1, 8, 15 and 22. They will be the fruit of ten years devoted largely to the study of the Periclean monuments in Greece.

Mr. John W. Beatty, art director at the Carnegie Institute, has announced the personnel of the jury of award for the nineteenth international exhibition which will be opened in Pittsburgh on April 29. There are two foreign members and eight Americans. Julius Olsson comes from England and André Dauchez from France. The Americans are Emil Carlsen, Bruce Crane, Charles H. Davis, C. W. Hawthorne, E. W. Redfield, W. L. Lathrop, Gardner Symons and E. C. Tarbell. The jury will meet on April 8 to determine the award of honors.